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ABSTRACT

This study investigated common themes in preservice teachers' case writing, noting how the thematic content diversified since teacher educators first added case writing to the course agenda. The study examined contributing factors that influenced expansions in preservice teachers' case writing perspectives and theme variations in preservice teachers' cases related to the contextual conditions of their urban schools. Researchers examined 688 teaching cases written by 344 preservice teachers over 3 years. They collated the cases according to the two different teaching contexts in which the preservice teachers worked, placed the two groups of cases in chronological order, and read and reread the cases looking for emerging categories and patterns that would facilitate a coherent synthesis of the data. The narratives were coded according to prevailing themes. During the first year, all participants wrote about four main concerns in both of their narratives: classroom management/student discipline; student well-being; supporting students with diverse language needs; and guiding students' spelling development. During the second and third years, students' themes gradually expanded to 12 diverse concerns. Over the 3 years, the most persistent issues were: managing students; supporting the literacy learning of language variation speakers; and guiding students' spelling development. An appendix provides guidelines for writing teaching cases. (Contains 2 tables and 15 references.) (SM)

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Running head: Themes in Preservice Teachers' Cases

Themes in Preservice Teachers' Cases: Rich Sources of Information for Literacy Teacher Educators

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Themes in Preservice Teachers' Cases: Rich Sources of Information for Literacy Teacher Educators

Cases employed in teacher education are focused, engaging narratives varying in length from one to 30 pages. Usually written in the first person, they describe "a wide variety of [authentic] situations, decisions, dilemmas, and difficulties that routinely confront teachers and teacher educators" (Sykes, 1992, p. ix)

"Case writing may well bring special benefits to those who write them, prompting them to reflect upon their practices and to become more analytic about their work" (L. Shulman, 1992, p. 9)

As part of course requirements, preservice teachers in our field-based literacy methods courses write two case narratives per semester about their concerns and problems teaching elementary students in nonmainstream schools. Our observations show that raising questions and seeking solutions to context-specific teaching dilemmas help our preservice teachers come to recognize that there is no one "right answer" in teaching. Equally important, authoring cases helps to define our preservice teachers, early in their professional careers, as problem-solvers and reflective practitioners who willingly accept responsibility for their students' academic achievements (Richards & Gipe, accepted for publication).

As university supervisors, our own understandings of case methods have broadened considerably since we added case writing to our course agendas three years ago. We have become more proficient in fostering our preservice teachers' habits of critical reflection, helping them to reason and think through educational problems. We also have refined the ways in which we nurture our preservice teachers' case writing initiatives. For example, recently we devised explicit

directions to guide their writing (see Appendix for an example of these directions). In addition, we now urge our preservice teachers to seek and include relevant resources in their narratives, such as outside readings or conversations with peers and professionals, that may help them ponder and resolve their teaching concerns. Concurrently, we have become particularly drawn to the content of our preservice teachers' cases as rich sources of information. Specifically, we noted that the themes in our preservice teachers' narratives have diversified considerably since we first added case writing to our program requirements. We equate preservice teachers' abilities to distinguish and frame diverse classroom dilemmas with their maturing sensitivity and acuity as professionals. Therefore, we wanted to uncover some explanations for their expanded professional perspectives. Because we supervise literacy field programs in two urban, elementary schools in neighboring states (one school has student management problems, the other school has a significant number of language variation speakers), we also were curious to see if the content of the cases differed according to our preservice teachers' specific teaching milieus. Extensive studies show that "contexts clearly matter for teachers' work and how that work is experienced" (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 15). In addition, we wondered if examining and categorizing the cases according to thematic topics would pinpoint specific gaps in our instructional activities that might require our attention. Like most teacher educators, we want to accept responsibility for our practices and remediate rough spots in our pedagogy (Anderson, DeMeulle & Johnston, 1996; Ryan & Cooper, 1998).

In order to establish some firm answers to our speculations, we decided to conduct a systematic qualitative research project documenting the themes in our preservice teachers' narratives over the past three years. Ultimately, we hoped to improve our own teaching practices by uncovering the day-to-day concerns, dilemmas, needs, and complex situations of preservice teachers working with elementary students in nonmainstream schools.

Conceptual Framework for Our Inquiry

Three literatures informed our inquiry: 1) tenets of social constructivism which suggest that language reveals individual's knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984); 2) ideas from discourse analysis that describe written texts as true reflections of human experiences (Gee, Michaels, & O'Connor, 1992) and; 3) premises from social interactionism which suggest that as mature human beings encounter problems, they move to resolve those problems through thoughtful reflection and action (Woods, 1992). In addition, we were mindful of traditions from hermeneutic interpretations which "indicate that the same text can be read [and interpreted] in a number of different ways" (Tappan & Brown, 1992, p. 186).

Research Methodology

Questions Guiding Our Research

In our inquiry we sought to answer the following questions:

1) What common themes are visible in our preservice teachers' cases?

2) In what ways has the thematic content of our preservice teachers' narratives diversified since we first added case writing to our course agendas?
3) What contributing factors might influence expansions in our preservice teachers' case writing perspectives?
4) Are possible theme variations in our preservice teachers' cases related to the contextual conditions of the urban schools in which they work?
5) Do the contents of our preservice teachers' narratives illuminate distinct instructional shortcomings or program issues that we, as supervisors, need to correct?

Analyzing the Cases.

Working as a research team, we examined and categorized 688 teaching cases written by our 344 preservice teachers over the past three years (110 preservice teachers, Year 1, 118 preservice teachers, Year 2, 116 preservice teachers, Year 3). Each preservice teacher wrote two cases (one case was written six weeks into the semester and the other as part of final exam requirements). First, we collated the cases according to the two different teaching contexts in which our preservice teachers work (354 cases were written by 177 preservice teachers in the school with persistent student management problems and 334 cases were written by 167 preservice teachers in the school with a significant number of students who are language variation speakers). Then, we placed the two groups of cases in chronological order, beginning with the first year we implemented case writing with our preservice teachers.

In subsequent meetings, using analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklin, 1987), we read and reread the narratives, looking for emerging categories and patterns that would "facilitate a coherent synthesis of the data" (Gay, 1996, p. 227). We made notes and underlined what we considered to be salient dimensions of the texts as a way of revealing the predominant theme or central issue contained in each teaching case. Next, we coded and tabulated the narratives according to the prevailing theme (e.g., " Meeting students' diverse literacy learning needs" or "Worries about a student's well-being"). We settled any differences in our interpretations through collegial discussions until we reached agreement.

Themes in Our Preservice Teachers' Cases: Year One

Analysis of the cases revealed that across the two teaching contexts, during the first year of the project, all of our 110 preservice teachers wrote about four main concerns in both of their teaching narratives (i.e., 220 cases): 1) problems managing individual students or groups of students; 2) worries about a student's well-being; 3) concerns about supporting the literacy learning needs of students who are language variation speakers and; 4) dilemmas guiding students' spelling development (see Table 1 for the number of cases in each of these categories). The following case excerpts illustrate some of these common themes.

Problems Managing Individual Students or Groups of Students

Victoria: The Sweet Little Devil

One child in particular gives me great difficulties. Victoria is a pretty and

very active six-year-old girl. She is constantly out of her desk or in another's work space. On one occasion, Victoria ran up in front of the class and started dancing! Of course, I immediately told her to sit at her desk.

Victoria's misbehavior goes beyond misconduct and disrespect. The other day, I was helping a student with his journal and she looked at his entry about football and said, "Oh, you like to play football? You can't play football!"

Another time, Victoria looked at a boy and said, "Oh, he looks soooo cute! He looks like a girl."

Do I keep calling attention to Victoria's misbehavior and forfeit class time? Do I relax and overlook her behavior, hoping it will subside if I don't give her attention? I am lost. Please help me.

Worries about a Student's Well-Being

A Secret

In one of my journal entries to James I wrote how I used to sing in music competitions and I told him how nervous these competitions made me. This was his reply.

"I get nervous too ... about a gun, knife, and to die and to get hit by a car or to kill someone. My grandmother and grandad had a fight and I went over there and almost stabbed him in the head. But, I missed. Just between us please promise that you will keep this between us to [sic]."

Well, as you can imagine, I was quite alarmed when I read this. Hence, the dilemma. What does one do when a child asks you to keep a promise not to say

anything to anyone but, you feel that it may be something that the classroom teacher may need to know?

Dilemmas Guiding Students' Spelling Development

Is Invented Spelling For Everyone?

Margaret is a very sweet first grader. She always enjoys journal time. But, I always have to read my entry to her because she can't read. Then, she tells me what she wants to write to me and I write it for her. She does try to look at my entry and copy the date and my name. The problem is that when she does attempt to write back to me she just writes strings of letters. It isn't even invented spelling. It's just a random scrawl of letters.

One day in my entry to Margaret, I asked her, "What are your favorite things to do?"

She said, "My favorite thing is to work."

I replied, "That's great! Write that for me."

This is what she wrote, "Teknvolyahunftsg to go isimotkir. etnki."

I asked her to read her sentence to me. But, she couldn't and I couldn't read it either. That was a big mistake on my part. When she saw that I couldn't read her entry to me she felt terrible. Now she won't write at all.

Theme Expansions: Years Two and Three

Our analysis of the narratives also showed that during the second and third years of the project, the themes in our preservice teachers' cases gradually

expanded, as we suspected. All of our 234 preservice teachers (118 the second year and 116 the third year), wrote about one of the following 12 issues in both of their cases: 1) managing individual students or groups of students; 2) working with young learners; 3) teaching reading; 4) guiding students' spelling development; 5) teaching and promoting writing; 6) working with special needs students; 7) integrating the visual and performing arts with literacy activities; 8) meeting students' diverse literacy needs; 9) confronting social and educational issues impacting students' literacy learning; 10) enhancing students' speaking and listening abilities; 11) motivating students to enjoy learning and; 12) working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (see Table 2 for the number of cases in each of these categories). The following case excerpts depict some of these diverse themes.

Reading Instructional Problems

I Have Teaching Flaws

The other day I audio taped myself while I was teaching a reading lesson. What a shock I had when I listened to the tape! First, I assumed that my students had the same background knowledge that I have. I did not remember that I am working with fourth graders ... not adults. For example, I read a sentence from a story that said, "Fondo had become such a familiar face at the lake that even Mae Marie had a great fondness for him."

I said, "Isn't it interesting how the author chose to name the character, Fondo and Mae Marie had a fondness for him?"

I was hoping for some student comments. But, no one in the group said anything. After awhile, I realized that my students did not know what the word, 'fondness' meant. So, we stopped and used the word in meaningful sentences and then we entered the word in our personal dictionaries.

Another flaw I discovered is that I don't give my students enough time to respond to questions I ask pertaining to the story ... I tend to rush. I was horrified when I heard myself on the cassette tell a student, "Just a second on your response. We need to finish the story. But, thanks for raising your hand."

In these lessons I was more concerned about covering reading material than in promoting quality learning time for students. I sure learned about my flaws and I intend to correct them.

Concerns with Teaching and Promoting Writing

The Challenges of Creating a Book

The process of making creative books with first graders is harder than I anticipated. First, I made sure that I explained the basic features of all good stories ... characters, settings, problems, and solutions. In fact, I spent two days going over these features. Then, we started the creative books.

Derek was one of the children who had the most problems. He forgot all of the story features except characters. Then, he insisted that he would be the only character in his story. We were getting nowhere.

I finally had to make four big circles on a chart. I wrote one story feature in each of the circles. Then, I modeled, modeled, modeled how to create a story by

using the four story features. After that, I drew lines connecting the story characters with the settings, the settings with the problems, and the problems with the solutions, etc. Eventually, after talking with my fellow preservice teachers, I realized that I should have done all of this modeling at the beginning. I also should have made my own creative book and shared it with my group before I asked them to create their own books.

Dilemmas working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds

Eiza Uses "Her" Language

There is one girl in my group who speaks with a strong dialect. Eiza pronounces many words differently from other students. Her dialect directly impacts how she spells words. For example, she says, "sofer" for the word, "sofa." Understandably, she spells the word,'sofa,' 's-o-f-e-r.' She also pronounces the word, 'this', 'dis'. Of course, she spells the word, 'this', 'd-i-s'.

I try to emphasize to her that there is a time and place for speaking dialect. But, Eiza is only nine years old and she only knows one way of speaking ... the language she learned at home. I am getting nowhere trying to help her. I do read quality children's literature aloud to my group so that they will hear standard English. I also serve as a good role model. I speak standard English and write in standard English on the board and in our Language Experience Stories. But, I haven't made an impression with Eiza. She continues to use her "own" language. According to Norton (1997), I need to provide more interventions for promoting

Eiza's' recognition and use of standard English, such as small and large group discussions, drama, role-playing, improvisations, Show and Tell, sentence expansion activities, telephone conversations, and puppet shows.

School Context

Not surprisingly, our exploration of the cases showed that school context played a major part in influencing what experiences our preservice teachers discerned and considered especially troublesome. During the three years of the project, the 177 preservice teachers who worked in the elementary school noted for chronic student management problems authored 163 teaching cases dealing with student supervision concerns (i.e., 46% of 354 cases). Similarly, the 167 preservice teachers who taught where the majority of students are language variation speakers wrote 139 teaching cases centered on the literacy learning needs of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds(i.e., 41.6% of 334 cases).

Our Own Ongoing Development as Literacy Teacher Educators

In order to illuminate what contributing factors might have influenced the considerable expansions in our preservice teachers' case writing perspectives, we critically reflected on our own ongoing development and proficiencies as literacy teacher educators. We concluded that over the past three years we have become more knowledgeable about case-based methodology. We also acquired greater expertise in fostering our preservice teachers' habits of critical reflection. In

addition, we perfected and refined the ways in which we nurture our preservice teachers' case writing initiatives. For example, during the first year of the project we accepted teaching cases in which our preservice teachers asked us to find solutions to the dilemmas they presented (e.g., "So, Dr. R., what do you think I should do?"). Now, we require our preservice teachers to seek and describe possible remedies to their teaching concerns (e.g., "I decided to research this problem and discovered in my Ed Psych book that it is perfectly normal for young children to be egocentric. No wonder Hasa didn't want a student partner to correct his paper."). We also provide specific guidelines to direct our preservice teachers' case writing efforts (see Appendix). In addition, we schedule class time for our preservice teachers to engage in peer reviews of one another's cases. Further, we encourage our preservice teachers to consider case writing as a process, proceeding through several rough drafts until their final case manuscript is polished. Because of our own professional growth, we were able to help our preservice teachers become more capable and skillful at recognizing and documenting a variety of literacy teaching events as problematic and we became more accomplished supporting our preservice teachers as case authors and co-constructors of their own learning (see Harrington & Hodson, 1993).

Gaps in Instruction and Program Contextual Issues

Reviewing the themes in our preservice teachers' cases also highlighted some gaps in instruction and program contextual issues that need to be acknowledged and addressed. We discovered that over the past three years, three persistent

quandaries remained important to our preservice teachers: 1) concerns managing individual students or groups of students: 2) difficulties supporting the literacy learning of students who are language variation speakers and; 3) dilemmas guiding students' spelling development.

Discussion and Implications for Teacher Education

The findings of our inquiry point to the efficacy of case writing for preservice teachers. Focusing on educational quandaries and pondering possible solutions to problems has the potential to enhance preservice teachers' professional growth (L, Shulman, 1992). Further, the themes in preservice teachers' cases can serve as windows into their teaching experiences and provide rich sources of information concerning the contextual conditions of the schools in which preservice teachers work. For example, we found that recurring discipline problems in one of our participating elementary schools contributed to our preservice teachers' substantial concerns with student management considerations. In the same way, preservice teachers who worked with large numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students were considerably preoccupied with supporting the literacy learning needs of students whose first language differs from standard English. A fundamental factor affecting what preservice teachers learn and regard crucial about teaching may be the school context in which their teaching occurs (Richards, Gipe, & Moore, 1995).

In addition, careful attention to the case issues preservice teachers discern and consider important can offer insights to teacher educators about their own

competence in guiding preservice teachers' professional development. As we became more knowledgeable about case methods, we developed greater understandings of the approaches and conditions necessary for nurturing our preservice teachers' case writing initiatives. It appears that the evolution of our perspectives enhanced our preservice teachers' abilities to identify and write about diverse literacy instructional concerns.

Finally, the content of preservice teachers' narratives can pinpoint gaps in course instruction or issues pertinent to teacher education field programs that need to be remedied. Because we now recognize our preservice teachers' ongoing dilemmas promoting their students' spelling development, their continuing frustrations with student management considerations, and their difficulties supporting the literacy learning needs of students who are language variation speakers, it is crucial that we increase our own understandings about these three encompassing concerns. Then, we can supply relevant readings and offer effective demonstration lessons, lectures, and seminar discussions that support our preservice teachers' specific and immediate professional and contextual needs.

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Appendix

Guidelines for Writing Teaching Cases

"There is not yet a consensus among educators as to what [exactly] constitutes a good case" (Merseth, 1991, p. 7). However, teaching cases usually are written in the first person. Cases may tell one main story, "but embedded within that story are other problems that can be discussed: (J. Shulman, 1993, p. 2). Like all good stories, case contain characters that seem real, contain dialogue and rich detail, present a problem or a series of related problems that unfold over time, and are "contextualized in time and place" (L. Shulman, 1992, p. 21).

In order to write a good case, the first step is to identify and consciously reflect about a worrisome classroom problem. Then, after some preliminary planning, begin writing the first draft of your case. Write in the first person. Identify who you are, the context for the case, and the quandary that affects your teaching and your students' learning. Include real-life dialogue and exclude extraneous details. Your case may be as long as you wish, but should be a minimum of two pages.

The following questions may help you revise the first draft of your case:

1) Is itt easy to identify the problem in your case?
2) What might make your case better? For example, is there extraneous information? Have you included authentic dialogue? Have you titled your case?
3) Have you tried to brainstorm and come up with some alternatives to the dilemmas presented in your case?
4) Have you tried to research the issue presented in your case?

Table 1

Year One - 110 Preservice Teachers - 220 Cases

Predominant Case Themes and Number of Cases in Each Category

Problems managing students	79 cases
Worries about a student's well-being	26 cases
Concerns about language variation speakers	63 cases
Dilemmas guiding students' spelling development	52 cases

Table 2

Years Two and Three: 234 Preservice Teachers - 468 Cases
Predominant Case Themes and Number of Cases in Each Category

Managing students	84 cases
Working with young learners	30 cases
Teaching reading	24 cases
Guiding students' spelling development	96 cases
Teaching writing	18 cases
Working with special needs students	74 cases
Integrating the arts with literacy	14 cases
Meeting students diverse literacy needs	14 cases
Confronting social and educational issues	10 cases
Enhancing students' speaking and listening	10 cases
Motivating students to enjoy learning	18 cases
Working with language variation speakers	76 cases